Gamification in 21st-Century ESL Learning: A Conceptual Analysis of Learners' Motivation and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Gamification has become an increasingly relevant approach in 21st-century ESL learning as it integrates game elements into teaching and learning activities to encourage learners' active participation. In ESL classrooms, sustaining learners' motivation and engagement remains an important concern because language learning requires continuous practice, interaction and meaningful involvement. This article is presented as a concept paper that critically synthesises existing literature to examine the role of gamification in enhancing learners' motivation and engagement in ESL learning. Specifically, it compares findings from previous studies, identifies contrasting evidence and discusses areas requiring further exploration. Although closely related, motivation and engagement are considered distinct aspects of learning. Motivation concerns learners' interest and willingness to initiate and sustain learning, whereas engagement refers to the quality of their participation, interaction and involvement in meaningful language tasks. Previous research suggests that gamification elements such as rewards, challenges and immediate feedback may support these aspects, although concerns remain regarding short-lived motivational effects, excessive competition and overdependence on external rewards. Based on this synthesis, the paper proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how gamification may increase motivation and enhance engagement, with both potentially contributing to meaningful ESL learning and language development. It also discusses practical applications through interactive quizzes, collaborative challenges and language-focused activities. Overall, the paper emphasises the importance of aligning gamification with clear pedagogical objectives to support meaningful ESL learning.

Keywords: Gamification, ESL learning, 21st-century learning, motivation, engagement

INTRODUCTION

English language learning continues to play an important role in the Malaysian education system, particularly because English is widely used for academic, professional and global communication purposes. However, learning English as a second language (ESL) is not always easy for learners, especially when they are expected to master different language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. In Malaysia, English language learning can be challenging because learners need to understand grammar, build vocabulary, communicate meaningfully and apply the language in real-life contexts (Yaccob et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the importance of adopting teaching approaches that provide meaningful opportunities for learners to practise English while encouraging their motivation and active involvement in learning activities (Shahidan & Kamarol Ariffin, 2024; Yaccob et al., 2022).

In the context of 21st-century learning, teaching and learning are increasingly associated with learner-centred practices, technology integration, collaboration, communication and active participation. Mee et al. (2021) explain that 21st-century education is closely related to collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Similarly, Yaccob et al. (2022) highlight how developments in educational technology have encouraged the integration of digital and gamified learning approaches into English language classrooms. These developments suggest that ESL teachers need to consider approaches that not only attract learners' attention but also create opportunities for meaningful interaction and language practice. Gamification has emerged as one approach that may support these instructional aims through the purposeful integration of game elements into learning activities (Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

Gamification refers to the use of game design elements in non-game contexts, including teaching and learning. In education, gamification may include points, badges, leaderboards, rewards, levels, feedback, quizzes, challenges and progress indicators to make learning more interactive and goal-oriented. Zhang and Hasim (2023), in their systematic review of 40 empirical studies, identified feedback, points, quizzes, digital badges, leaderboards and rewards as frequently used gamification elements in EFL and ESL instruction. Similarly, Yaccob et al. (2022) discuss how gamification can encourage learners' participation through motivational and interactive learning experiences. However, these elements are not intended to replace language teaching with entertainment. Instead, their educational value depends on how they are incorporated into activities that support specific language learning objectives (Yaccob et al., 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

Motivation is one of the main aspects associated with gamified ESL learning because it influences learners' willingness to initiate, participate in and continue learning activities. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, Ryan and Deci (2020) explain that motivation encompasses different reasons for engaging in activities, including intrinsic interest and extrinsic forms of motivation. They further emphasise that autonomy, competence and relatedness are important psychological needs that influence motivational processes. Within gamified ESL learning, achievable challenges, constructive feedback and opportunities for learner choice may support these needs by helping learners experience progress, competence and greater ownership of their learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Previous studies have also reported positive motivational responses to gamified learning activities involving rewards, challenges and competition (Grab, 2025; Jalim & Ngui, 2025). Nevertheless, these elements may not influence all learners in the same way, particularly when rewards and competition are experienced as controlling rather than supportive (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

Besides motivation, engagement is another important aspect of ESL learning. Although motivation and engagement are closely related, they should not be treated as interchangeable concepts. Hiver et al. (2024) explain that engagement in language learning concerns the quantity and quality of learners' active involvement in learning tasks, encompassing behavioural, cognitive, affective and social dimensions. While motivation concerns the reasons learners are willing to initiate and sustain learning, engagement focuses on how learners actively participate, direct their attention, interact with others and process language during learning activities (Hiver et al., 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2020). For example, receiving points may encourage a learner to attempt a vocabulary challenge, reflecting a motivational response. However, completing the challenge, discussing possible answers and applying vocabulary in meaningful contexts illustrate behavioural, cognitive and social engagement. This distinction is particularly important because participation motivated by rewards does not necessarily indicate meaningful engagement with the language being learned (Hiver et al., 2024).

Several studies have reported encouraging findings regarding gamification in ESL learning. Anwer et al. (2025), in a questionnaire-based study involving 218 undergraduate ESL learners in Pakistan, reported positive associations between gamification and learners' motivation and engagement. Similarly, Jalim and Ngui (2025), through a qualitative study involving 26 ESL students in rural Sabah, observed improvements in classroom participation, cooperation and motivation during gamified English lessons. However, these findings represent different forms of evidence. Anwer et al. examined statistical relationships through questionnaire responses, whereas Jalim and Ngui investigated classroom behaviours and learners' experiences through observations and interviews. Consequently, although both studies provide support for the potential benefits of gamification, their findings should not be interpreted as equivalent evidence of sustained motivation or meaningful engagement.

Nevertheless, gamification should not be viewed as an automatic solution to ESL learning challenges. Zhang and Hasim (2023) identified limitations such as technical difficulties, short-lived positive effects and negative experiences associated with competition. Similarly, Yaccob et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of creating a supportive learning environment to prevent competition from discouraging learners. In contrast, Jalim and Ngui (2025) observed that some improvements in classroom participation continued during a subsequent non-gamified lesson following the introduction of rewards. Although this observation suggests that certain positive classroom behaviours may persist beyond an individual gamified activity, it does not establish whether motivational benefits can be sustained over longer periods. These findings raise questions about the conditions under which gamification promotes continued interest in English learning rather than temporary participation

driven by rewards or novelty. Moreover, Hiver et al. (2024) identify considerable variation in how engagement has been conceptualised and measured in language learning research, highlighting the need to examine the quality of learners' involvement rather than relying solely on observable participation.

The application of gamification in ESL classrooms also requires attention to instructional design and language learning objectives. Jalim and Ngui (2025) examined the use of Kahoot!, Quizizz, Baamboozle and classroom rewards, reporting differences in learners' participation across the observed lessons. Meanwhile, Azmi et al. (2025) investigated a literary-themed escape-room activity involving Malaysian secondary school students and reported improvements in literary comprehension alongside qualitative evidence of motivation, collaboration and active problem-solving. Although these studies examined different learning contexts and gamification approaches, they suggest that meaningful ESL engagement can be supported through different forms of interaction and language-focused challenges. Therefore, gamification should be considered not merely in terms of the game elements used but also in relation to the opportunities learners are given to communicate, collaborate and apply English in purposeful learning activities (Azmi et al., 2025; Jalim & Ngui, 2025).

Based on these considerations, this article is presented as a concept paper that critically synthesises selected existing literature and proposes a conceptual framework to explain how gamification may enhance learners' motivation and engagement in 21st-century ESL learning. The proposed framework draws on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) and the multidimensional understanding of language learning engagement discussed by Hiver et al. (2024). It distinguishes two related pathways: a motivational pathway through which gamification may support learners' perceived competence, autonomy, relatedness and willingness to continue learning, and an engagement pathway through which purposeful language tasks, cognitive processing and peer exchange may support behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement. Rather than assuming that all gamification elements produce positive outcomes, the framework also considers the influence of instructional design, learner needs and classroom conditions. Through this proposed framework, the concept paper seeks to clarify the distinct roles of motivation and engagement, critically examine contrasting findings from previous research and discuss how gamification can be meaningfully applied in ESL teaching. The framework is intended as a literature-informed conceptual proposition that requires further empirical examination.

Objectives of the Paper

Previous studies have highlighted the potential of gamification to enhance learners' motivation and engagement in ESL learning (Anwer et al., 2025; Yaccob et al., 2022). However, concerns regarding short-lived motivational effects and excessive competition suggest the need for further critical examination (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Therefore, this concept paper aims to discuss the role of gamification in enhancing learners' motivation and engagement in ESL learning. Specifically, the paper is guided by the following objectives:

- To discuss the role of gamification in enhancing learners' motivation in ESL learning.
- To discuss the role of gamification in enhancing learners' engagement in ESL learning.

Literature Identification and Selection

This concept paper adopts a targeted narrative synthesis of existing literature concerning gamification, learners' motivation and engagement in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Relevant literature was identified through searches conducted in the Scopus database using keywords and phrases related to gamification in English language teaching, including "gamification in TESL", "gamification in ESL", "motivation" and "engagement". Searches for specific article titles were also conducted to locate publications relevant to the focus of this concept paper. The selected literature mainly comprises studies published between 2020 and 2025, including empirical investigations, systematic reviews and theoretical discussions.

The literature was screened according to its relevance to the paper's two objectives, particularly its

examination of motivational processes, learner engagement and the pedagogical application of gamification in English language teaching. Priority was given to studies providing evidence of classroom participation, learners' perceptions, language-related performance and instructional conditions. Relevant studies were critically appraised by examining their research designs, participant characteristics, data collection measures, reported outcomes and methodological limitations.

The findings were synthesised narratively by comparing positive and contrasting evidence, identifying recurring themes and considering differences in research methods and educational contexts. Particular attention was given to the distinction between short-term motivational responses and sustained motivation, as well as observable participation and meaningful language engagement. The synthesis was used to inform a proposed conceptual framework rather than establish causal relationships. As this paper is a targeted conceptual analysis, it does not claim to provide an exhaustive systematic review of the literature. Table 1 summarises the research designs, samples, measures, key findings and methodological limitations of selected studies relevant to gamification, motivation and engagement in English language learning.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Studies on Gamification, Motivation and Engagement in English Language Learning

Study	Research Design and Sample	Measures / Instruments	Key Findings	Limitations
Helvich et al. (2023)	Systematic review of 11 studies	Teachers' perceptions, questionnaires and evaluations of gamification platforms	Teachers generally perceived gamification positively in relation to learners' motivation.	Limited direct evidence of language learning outcomes; technological barriers and teacher-related challenges.
Zhang & Hasim (2023)	Systematic review of 40 empirical studies	Gamification elements, learner experiences and language learning outcomes	Generally positive findings concerning motivation, engagement and language learning experiences.	Variation in research designs, short-lived effects and negative experiences associated with competition.
Chan & Lo (2024)	Rapid evidence assessment of 30 empirical studies	Gamification components, learner responses and language learning outcomes	Encouraging but mixed findings regarding learner engagement and language performance.	Differences in instructional contexts, interventions and assessment methods.
Hiver et al. (2024)	Systematic review of 112 language learning studies	Definitions, conceptualisations and measures of learner engagement	Identified inconsistencies in how engagement was defined and measured in language learning research.	Examined language learning engagement broadly rather than gamification specifically.
Anwer et al. (2025)	Quantitative questionnaire study involving 218 undergraduate ESL learners	Structured questionnaires measuring gamification, motivation and engagement	Positive statistical associations between gamification and learners' motivation and engagement.	Self-reported data, limited causal inference and inconsistencies in reported engagement statistics.

Azmi et al. (2025)	Mixed-methods, single-group pre-test and post-test study involving 30 Malaysian Form 5 learners	Literary comprehension tests and reflective writing	Improved literary comprehension and positive experiences involving collaboration and problem-solving.	Four-week intervention, small sample and absence of a concurrent control group.
Grab (2025)	Mixed-methods pre-test and post-test study involving 200 university ESL learners, with 30 interviewed	Motivation and engagement questionnaires and interviews	Increased self-reported intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and engagement.	No clearly established concurrent comparison group; reliance on self-reported measures.
Jalim & Ngui (2025)	Qualitative study involving 26 secondary school ESL learners in rural Sabah	Classroom observation checklists, field notes and interviews	Increased classroom participation, cooperation and willingness to volunteer during gamified lessons.	Small sample and differences between lessons, limiting direct comparisons between platforms.

Issues in ESL Learning

One of the main issues in ESL learning is sustaining learners' motivation and engagement throughout the learning process. Motivation influences learners' willingness to initiate and continue learning English, whereas engagement concerns the quantity and quality of their active involvement in language learning activities (Hiver et al., 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These aspects are particularly important because learning English requires continuous practice, interaction and opportunities to apply language knowledge meaningfully (Yaccob et al., 2022). However, learners' willingness to participate does not necessarily indicate meaningful engagement with the language being learned. Therefore, motivation and engagement should be examined as distinct but related concerns in ESL learning.

Traditional or passive learning approaches may not always provide sufficient opportunities for learners to participate actively, particularly when classroom activities rely heavily on teacher explanations rather than language practice (Yaccob et al., 2022). Gamification has been suggested as a possible approach to addressing this concern by incorporating elements such as challenges, rewards, feedback and interactive activities into ESL instruction (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Nevertheless, the inclusion of game elements alone does not guarantee that learners will develop sustained motivation or become meaningfully engaged in learning English.

Another important issue concerns whether increased participation in gamified activities contributes to actual language learning. Helvich et al. (2023) highlighted the need for stronger evidence regarding language learning outcomes in studies examining EFL teachers' perspectives. In comparison, Azmi et al. (2025) reported improvements in literary comprehension following a gamified escape-room intervention involving Malaysian secondary school learners. However, the absence of a concurrent control group limits the extent to which these improvements can be attributed specifically to gamification. Therefore, ESL teachers should consider not only learners' enjoyment and participation but also the opportunities provided for meaningful language processing and interaction. These issues highlight the importance of examining how gamification can support motivation and engagement while remaining aligned with the intended objectives of ESL learning.

Gamification as a 21st-Century ESL Learning Approach

Gamification refers to the integration of game design elements into non-game contexts, including education. In ESL learning, gamification does not necessarily involve replacing language lessons with complete games.

Instead, it incorporates elements such as points, badges, rewards, challenges, feedback and progress indicators into learning activities to encourage learners' participation and support instructional objectives. Yaccob et al. (2022) distinguish gamification from game-based learning, explaining that the former integrates game elements into existing activities, whereas the latter uses games as the medium for learning. This distinction is important because the educational purpose of gamification should extend beyond entertainment to support meaningful language learning experiences (Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

Gamification is relevant to 21st-century ESL learning because it can be incorporated into learner-centred activities that encourage interaction, collaboration and active participation. Both digital and non-digital approaches can provide opportunities for learners to engage with English through structured challenges and immediate feedback (Mee et al., 2021; Yaccob et al., 2022). For example, teachers may integrate gamification into vocabulary exercises, grammar activities and reading comprehension tasks by introducing achievable goals, progress indicators and opportunities for learners to apply language knowledge. However, the educational value of these activities depends on whether the game elements support the intended language learning objectives rather than merely encouraging learners to compete for points.

Different gamification approaches may also influence learners' classroom participation. Jalim and Ngui (2025), in their qualitative study involving 26 ESL learners in rural Sabah, examined activities incorporating Kahoot!, Quizizz, Baamboozle and classroom rewards. They observed stronger participation during lessons using Kahoot! and Quizizz than during the Baamboozle lesson. The researchers suggested that opportunities for direct learner interaction may have contributed to these differences, as learners could respond individually through devices during the former activities, whereas the Baamboozle activity was controlled by the teacher. Nevertheless, because the platforms were examined across different lessons, these observations do not establish that one application is inherently more effective than another. Instead, they highlight the importance of considering how gamified activities provide opportunities for learners to participate and interact.

Game-inspired approaches can also be implemented without relying extensively on digital technology. Azmi et al. (2025) investigated a literary-themed escape-room activity involving 30 Malaysian secondary school learners. The activity required learners to interpret textual clues, solve problems and collaborate to complete language-related challenges. The study reported improvements in literary comprehension alongside positive learner experiences involving motivation and collaboration. Although educational escape rooms may also be classified as game-based learning, the structured challenges and opportunities for progression illustrated in this study offer relevant principles for designing gamified ESL activities.

Nevertheless, the implementation of gamification requires careful instructional planning. Zhang and Hasim (2023) identified technical difficulties, short-lived positive effects and negative experiences associated with competition, while Helvich et al. (2023) highlighted technological barriers and teachers' limited skills as implementation challenges. These findings suggest that gamification should not be evaluated solely through learners' enjoyment or participation. Instead, teachers should consider learners' needs, available resources and the opportunities provided for meaningful English language practice. Accordingly, gamification should be understood as a supportive pedagogical approach whose effectiveness depends on purposeful design and alignment with ESL learning objectives.

Gamification and Learners' Motivation

Motivation plays an important role in ESL learning because it influences learners' willingness to initiate learning activities, invest effort and persist in developing their English language skills. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, Ryan and Deci (2020) explain that motivation is influenced by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. These needs provide a theoretical basis for explaining how gamification may encourage learners' motivation. Rather than assuming that game elements directly increase motivation, the proposed motivational pathway suggests that their influence depends on how learners interpret feedback, experience progress and develop a sense of ownership over their learning.

A central mechanism within this pathway is competence-supportive feedback. Gamification elements such as progress indicators, achievable challenges, levels and immediate feedback may help learners recognise their developing abilities. For example, when learners complete a vocabulary challenge and receive constructive explanations about their responses, they may become more aware of what they have mastered and what requires further improvement. Such experiences may strengthen perceived competence and encourage learners to continue practising English. Similarly, providing choices between activities or allowing learners to progress according to their proficiency levels may support autonomy, while collaborative challenges may foster relatedness. According to Ryan and Deci (2020), learning environments that support these psychological needs are more likely to encourage autonomous motivation than environments primarily governed by external pressure. Laksanasut (2025) also highlights the theoretical relevance of learner autonomy, real-time feedback and adaptive learning pathways in gamified ESL and EFL instruction, supporting the importance of designing activities around learners' psychological and instructional needs.

Previous research provides evidence consistent with the motivational potential of gamification. Grab (2025), in a study involving 200 university ESL learners, reported an increase in self-reported intrinsic motivation from a mean of 3.2 to 4.2 and extrinsic motivation from 3.5 to 4.5 following gamified instruction. Similarly, Anwer et al. (2025) identified a positive association between gamification and learners' motivation ($r = .675$) among 218 undergraduate ESL learners. Jalim and Ngui (2025) also observed that classroom rewards encouraged learners to volunteer and participate during English lessons. Although these findings suggest that gamification may encourage positive motivational responses, they do not independently establish that specific game elements produce sustained autonomous motivation. Instead, they highlight the need to examine the psychological processes through which learners respond to gamified activities.

The distinction between competence-supportive feedback and externally controlling rewards is particularly important. Zhang and Hasim (2023) identified concerns regarding short-lived positive effects and negative experiences associated with excessive competition. These concerns are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that external incentives may influence motivation differently depending on whether they are experienced as supportive or controlling (Ryan & Deci, 2020). For instance, a progress indicator that recognises individual improvement may encourage learners to develop confidence in their abilities, whereas a leaderboard that repeatedly highlights low performance may discourage some learners. Consequently, the effectiveness of gamification should be examined in relation to the quality of feedback, task difficulty, learner differences and opportunities for autonomous participation.

Based on this literature, the proposed motivational pathway predicts that competence-supportive feedback and appropriately designed challenges will be associated with stronger perceived competence, greater willingness to undertake English learning activities and increased persistence in language practice. These outcomes may be examined through learners' reported motivation, willingness to attempt additional tasks and continued participation beyond immediate rewards. Importantly, motivation is distinguished from engagement because it concerns learners' reasons and willingness to initiate or sustain learning, rather than the quality of their involvement in individual tasks. Nevertheless, increased motivation may create opportunities for deeper engagement, while successful learning experiences may further strengthen subsequent motivation. This reciprocal relationship provides a basis for the feedback mechanisms incorporated into the proposed conceptual framework.

Gamification and Learners' Engagement

Engagement represents the extent and quality of learners' involvement in ESL learning activities. Although motivation may influence learners' willingness to participate, engagement concerns what learners actually do, think, feel and contribute during learning tasks. Hiver et al. (2024) conceptualise language learning engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural, cognitive, affective and social dimensions. These dimensions provide a more comprehensive explanation of how gamification may support meaningful involvement in ESL learning. Accordingly, the proposed engagement pathway emphasises the learning processes encouraged by gamified activities rather than assuming that greater enjoyment or participation necessarily represents deeper engagement.

Behavioural engagement concerns learners' observable participation, including attempting tasks, responding to questions and completing activities. Gamification elements such as interactive quizzes, structured challenges and progress indicators may encourage learners to become more actively involved in classroom activities (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Jalim and Ngui (2025), in their qualitative study involving 26 secondary school ESL learners in rural Sabah, observed increased participation during gamified English lessons. However, behavioural participation alone does not indicate whether learners are meaningfully processing the target language. For example, responding quickly to a vocabulary question may demonstrate participation, but it does not necessarily show that the learner understands the meaning or appropriate use of the selected word.

Cognitive engagement therefore represents a central mechanism within the proposed engagement pathway. It concerns the attention, mental effort and language processing learners invest in completing tasks (Hiver et al., 2024). Gamified activities may support cognitive engagement when they require learners to interpret information, justify answers, solve problems and apply English in meaningful contexts. Azmi et al. (2025), for instance, investigated a literary-themed escape-room activity in which Malaysian secondary school learners interpreted textual clues and collaborated to solve language-related challenges. The study reported improvements in literary comprehension alongside positive experiences involving problem-solving and collaboration. These findings suggest that carefully designed challenges can create opportunities for deeper language processing. Nevertheless, the educational value of such activities depends on the cognitive and linguistic demands embedded in the tasks rather than the presence of game elements alone.

Affective engagement is also incorporated into the revised framework because learners' emotional experiences influence how they participate in language learning activities. According to Hiver et al. (2024), affective engagement concerns emotional involvement during learning, including enjoyment, interest and responses to challenging tasks. Within gamified ESL activities, achievable goals, constructive feedback and supportive interaction may encourage positive emotional experiences, whereas excessive competition or repeated failure may contribute to frustration or anxiety (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Importantly, affective engagement differs from motivation in its emphasis on emotional responses experienced during task participation, rather than the broader reasons for initiating or continuing learning. Including this dimension therefore provides a more complete understanding of learners' engagement without treating motivation and engagement as interchangeable constructs.

Social engagement represents another important dimension, particularly because English language learning requires meaningful communication and interaction. Collaborative gamified activities may encourage learners to exchange information, negotiate meanings, explain ideas and work towards shared learning goals. Yaccob et al. (2022) discuss the potential of gamification to support teamwork, while Azmi et al. (2025) reported positive learner experiences involving peer assistance and collaborative problem-solving. However, merely placing learners into groups does not necessarily promote meaningful social engagement. Teachers must ensure that activities require purposeful English-language interaction rather than allowing learners to complete challenges without communicating about the language content.

Based on these considerations, the proposed engagement pathway predicts that gamified activities requiring meaningful language processing and purposeful interaction will be associated with stronger cognitive and social engagement than activities emphasising points or response speed alone. It further proposes that supportive emotional experiences may encourage learners to sustain their behavioural and cognitive involvement. These relationships may be investigated through classroom observations, analysis of learners' explanations and interactions, reports of task-related emotions and assessments of language application. Unlike the motivational pathway, which emphasises perceived competence and willingness to continue learning, the engagement pathway focuses on the behavioural, cognitive, affective and social processes occurring during language tasks. Both pathways may contribute to meaningful ESL learning, but their relationships with measurable language development require empirical examination.

Critical appraisal of existing evidence and research gaps

Existing research generally suggests that gamification has the potential to support learners' motivation and engagement in English language learning. Zhang and Hasim (2023), in their systematic review of 40 empirical

studies, identified encouraging findings concerning learners' attitudes, language skills and learning experiences. Similarly, Chan and Lo (2024) reported positive outcomes across various EFL and ESL instructional contexts. Arip and Hashim (2024) further contribute to this evidence through a systematic review of 28 studies examining gamification in ESL and EFL learning, highlighting its relevance to language acquisition, motivation and engagement. Nevertheless, the strength of this evidence varies according to the research designs, participant characteristics, measures and duration of the studies. Consequently, positive findings should be interpreted in relation to the type of evidence produced rather than treated as uniform confirmation of gamification's effectiveness.

One methodological concern involves the reliance on self-reported measures of motivation and engagement. Anwer et al. (2025), in a quantitative study involving 218 undergraduate ESL learners, reported positive associations between gamification and both constructs. However, the questionnaire-based design does not establish that gamification independently caused the reported outcomes, while inconsistencies in the reported engagement statistics require cautious interpretation. Similarly, Grab (2025) reported improvements in learners' self-reported motivation and engagement following gamified instruction involving 200 university students. Although these findings offer insights into learners' responses, the absence of a clearly established concurrent comparison group limits causal interpretation. Furthermore, self-reported enthusiasm does not necessarily demonstrate sustained participation, meaningful language processing or measurable improvement in English proficiency.

Classroom-based investigations provide complementary evidence but introduce different limitations. Jalim and Ngui (2025), through observations and interviews involving 26 secondary school learners in rural Sabah, identified increased participation, cooperation and willingness to volunteer during gamified English lessons. However, differences in classroom activities across the observed lessons limit direct comparisons between gamification platforms. In contrast, Azmi et al. (2025) investigated a literary-themed escape-room intervention involving 30 Malaysian secondary school learners and reported improvements in literary comprehension alongside positive collaborative experiences. Nevertheless, the four-week intervention and absence of a concurrent control group make it difficult to isolate the contribution of the game-inspired approach from other instructional influences. These studies demonstrate the value of examining classroom experiences and language-related performance while highlighting the need for stronger comparative research designs.

Another concern relates to how learner engagement is conceptualised and measured. Hiver et al. (2024), in their systematic review of 112 language learning studies, identified 73 studies that adopted generic or insufficiently specified definitions of engagement. This limitation is particularly relevant to gamification because observable participation, enjoyment and successful task completion may reflect different forms of involvement. For example, responding frequently during a gamified quiz may indicate behavioural engagement, but it does not necessarily demonstrate sustained cognitive processing or meaningful social interaction. Similarly, learners' enjoyment of a gamified task represents an affective response that should not automatically be equated with their broader motivation to continue learning English. Therefore, future investigations should distinguish behavioural, cognitive, affective and social engagement through clearly defined and appropriate measures.

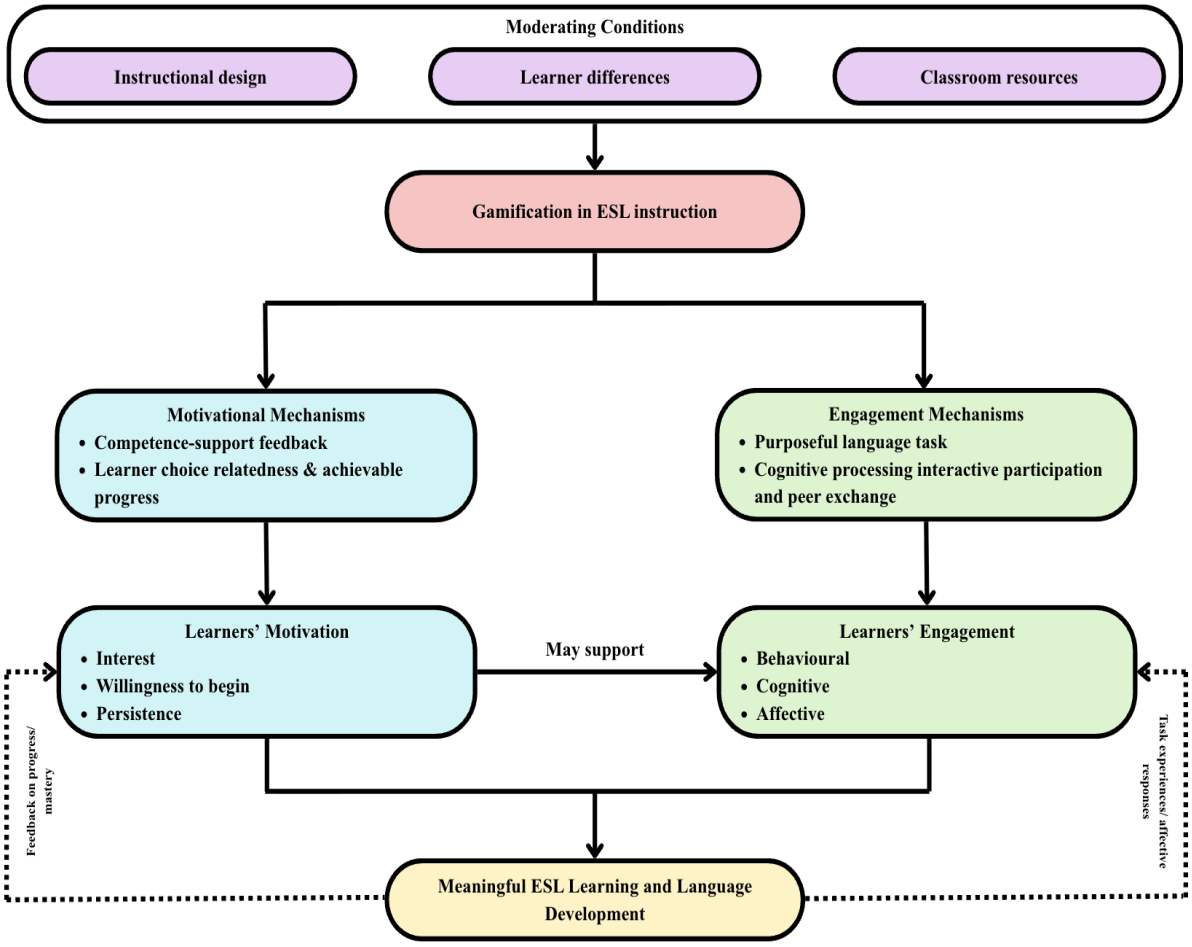
The sustainability and contextual conditions of gamification also require further examination. Although previous studies have reported positive motivational responses, Zhang and Hasim (2023) identified concerns regarding short-lived effects and negative experiences associated with competition. In addition, Helvich et al. (2023) highlighted technological barriers and teachers' limited skills as challenges affecting implementation. Chan and Lo (2024) similarly demonstrated that findings vary across instructional settings and gamification approaches. These differences suggest that gamification should not be evaluated solely through the presence of rewards, points or digital platforms. Instead, its potential benefits need to be considered in relation to instructional design, learner characteristics, available resources and the opportunities created for meaningful language practice.

Taken together, these methodological and conceptual limitations reveal several research gaps. First, further evidence is needed to determine whether competence-supportive feedback and psychological need satisfaction explain changes in learners' motivation. Second, research should examine whether language-focused

challenges produce meaningful cognitive, affective and social engagement beyond increased classroom participation. Third, longitudinal and comparative studies are needed to investigate how motivation and engagement develop over time and whether they contribute to measurable language outcomes. Finally, greater attention should be given to the moderating roles of instructional design, learner differences and classroom resources. These gaps inform the proposed conceptual framework, which distinguishes the motivational and engagement pathways while identifying mechanisms and relationships that require future empirical testing.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework of gamification in ESL



Note. Solid arrows represent the proposed forward relationships between gamification, motivational and engagement mechanisms, learners' motivation and engagement, and meaningful ESL learning and language development. Dotted arrows illustrate feedback relationships through which learning progress, task experiences and affective responses may influence subsequent motivation and engagement. The moderating conditions represent contextual factors shaping the implementation of gamification. All relationships are conceptual propositions requiring empirical validation.

Based on the critical synthesis of previous literature, this concept paper proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how gamification may support learners' motivation and engagement in ESL learning through two distinct but related pathways. As presented in Figure 1, the framework incorporates motivational mechanisms and engagement mechanisms that may contribute to meaningful ESL learning and language development. It draws on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) and the conceptualisation of language learning engagement discussed by Hiver et al. (2024). Rather than assuming that gamification directly produces positive learning outcomes, the framework considers the processes through which game elements may influence learners' experiences and participation.

The first pathway focuses on learners' motivation. As illustrated in Figure 1, the proposed motivational mechanisms include competence-supportive feedback, learner choice, relatedness and achievable progress. These mechanisms are informed by Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises the importance of competence, autonomy and relatedness in supporting motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Within gamified ESL instruction, constructive feedback may help learners recognise their progress, while achievable challenges and opportunities for choice may encourage confidence and a sense of ownership over learning. Collaborative activities may also support relatedness by allowing learners to work towards shared goals. Through these mechanisms, gamification may encourage learners' interest, willingness to begin learning activities and persistence in practising English. However, the motivational contribution of these elements depends on how learners experience them, particularly when rewards and competition are involved (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

The second pathway concerns learners' engagement. In Figure 1, the engagement mechanisms involve purposeful language tasks, cognitive processing, interactive participation and peer exchange. Unlike the motivational pathway, which emphasises learners' willingness and persistence, this pathway focuses on the processes occurring during language learning activities. Gamified challenges may encourage learners to participate actively, interpret information, apply language knowledge and exchange ideas with peers. Drawing on Hiver et al. (2024), the framework explicitly highlights behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement. Behavioural engagement concerns observable participation and task completion, while cognitive engagement involves sustained attention, mental effort and meaningful language processing. Affective engagement refers to learners' emotional experiences during learning activities, including enjoyment, interest and anxiety. Although social engagement is also recognised within the broader language learning literature, the present figure represents peer interaction through the engagement mechanism of peer exchange rather than displaying social engagement as a separate outcome dimension.

The framework further proposes a relationship between motivation and engagement. As indicated by the arrow labelled "May support" in Figure 1, motivation may encourage engagement by increasing learners' willingness to participate and persist in language learning activities. For instance, learners who experience progress and develop confidence through constructive feedback may become more willing to attempt challenging English tasks. Nevertheless, motivation and engagement remain distinct constructs. A learner may be motivated to participate without necessarily demonstrating meaningful cognitive engagement, while active participation in a gamified activity does not automatically indicate sustained motivation. Consequently, the framework proposes that motivation may support engagement without treating the two constructs as interchangeable.

Both pathways are proposed to contribute to meaningful ESL learning and language development. The motivational pathway may encourage learners to initiate and sustain language practice, whereas the engagement pathway may provide opportunities for active participation, language processing and task-related emotional involvement. Together, these processes may support learners' understanding and application of English. However, positive motivation and engagement should not be interpreted as guarantees of improved language proficiency, as meaningful language development requires appropriate assessment of learning outcomes (Chan & Lo, 2024; Helvich et al., 2023).

Figure 1 also illustrates feedback relationships through dotted arrows connecting meaningful ESL learning and language development to subsequent motivation and engagement. On the motivational side, feedback concerning progress and mastery may strengthen learners' perceived competence and willingness to continue learning. On the engagement side, successful task experiences and affective responses may influence learners' subsequent participation and cognitive involvement. These feedback relationships suggest that learners' experiences may change over time rather than remain constant throughout gamified instruction. Nevertheless, the proposed relationships remain theoretical and require empirical examination.

Finally, the framework incorporates three moderating conditions: instructional design, learner differences and classroom resources. As illustrated at the top of Figure 1, these conditions are proposed to shape the implementation of gamification in ESL instruction. Instructional design concerns the alignment of game elements with language learning objectives, task difficulty and feedback.

Learner differences include language proficiency, confidence, learning preferences and responses to competition, while classroom resources concern technological access, instructional materials and teacher support. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of these considerations in determining how gamification is experienced and implemented (Chan & Lo, 2024; Helvich et al., 2023; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Accordingly, the framework recognises that gamification may operate differently across ESL learning contexts.

Testable Propositions Derived from the Framework

Based on the relationships illustrated in Figure 1, the following propositions are advanced to guide future empirical investigation.

P1: Competence-supportive feedback, learner choice and achievable progress in gamified ESL instruction will be positively associated with learners' motivation, particularly their interest, willingness to begin learning activities and persistence.

P2: Gamified ESL activities that incorporate purposeful language tasks and meaningful cognitive processing will be associated with higher behavioural and cognitive engagement than activities primarily emphasising rewards or rapid task completion.

P3: Learners reporting higher initial motivation will demonstrate greater subsequent engagement in gamified ESL activities, as reflected in their participation and task-related involvement.

P4: Gamified activities incorporating interactive participation and peer exchange will be associated with greater behavioural and cognitive engagement, while supportive task experiences will be associated with more positive affective engagement.

P5: Instructional design, learner differences and classroom resources will condition how gamification is implemented and will be associated with variations in learners' motivational and engagement outcomes.

P6: Positive learning experiences and evidence of language-related progress will be associated with subsequent increases in motivation and engagement through feedback concerning progress, mastery and task-related affective responses.

These propositions are intended to guide future empirical investigations rather than establish causal relationships. Further research is required to examine the proposed mechanisms, relationships and feedback processes using appropriate measures of motivation, engagement and language learning outcomes.

Pedagogical Applications of Gamification in ESL Teaching

The application of gamification in ESL teaching should focus on how game elements can support specific language learning objectives rather than merely making classroom activities entertaining. Majdoub (2021) emphasises the importance of meaningful instructional design, while Chan and Lo (2024) highlight the potential of gamification across different EFL and ESL learning contexts. Accordingly, teachers should select gamification elements based on learners' proficiency levels, learning needs and the language skills being developed. Vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and speaking activities offer opportunities to integrate challenges, feedback, progress indicators and collaborative tasks into ESL instruction.

One practical application involves using interactive quizzes to support vocabulary and grammar learning. Digital platforms such as Kahoot! and Quizizz allow teachers to incorporate questions, immediate feedback and progress indicators into classroom activities. Jalim and Ngui (2025), in their study involving secondary school ESL learners in rural Sabah, observed increased participation during lessons using these platforms. Similarly, Almusharraf (2023) reported favourable learner perceptions of Kahoot!-supported activities in online EFL classrooms, particularly in relation to learners' enthusiasm and classroom participation. Building on this approach, teachers could introduce vocabulary challenges in which learners select appropriate words, receive feedback and progress through increasingly challenging tasks. To extend the activity beyond

answering questions, learners could also explain their choices or construct original sentences using the targeted vocabulary. Such activities may encourage motivation through achievable goals and constructive feedback while supporting cognitive engagement through meaningful language application (Hiver et al., 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Reading comprehension can also be supported through collaborative challenges and problem-solving activities. Azmi et al. (2025) investigated a literary-themed escape-room activity involving Malaysian secondary school learners and reported improvements in literary comprehension alongside positive experiences involving collaboration and problem-solving. Drawing on the game-inspired design of this intervention, teachers could organise reading tasks in which learners interpret clues, identify main ideas, analyse characters or justify their understanding using textual evidence. Completing each task could allow learners to progress to the next challenge. This approach may encourage learners' interest through achievable goals while providing opportunities for behavioural participation, cognitive processing and social interaction.

Speaking activities provide another opportunity to incorporate gamification into meaningful ESL learning. Chan and Lo (2024) discuss gamified approaches involving interactive learning experiences and opportunities for language practice. Based on this literature, teachers could introduce collaborative speaking challenges requiring learners to exchange information, describe situations, solve problems or present group decisions. Rather than awarding points solely for speed or the number of responses, teachers could recognise clarity of communication, appropriate language use and constructive participation. These activities may encourage learners' willingness to communicate while providing opportunities for meaningful interaction. However, active participation in speaking challenges should not automatically be interpreted as improved speaking proficiency, which would require assessment against specific language performance criteria.

The implementation of gamification should also consider learners' differences and classroom resources. Deep et al. (2024) similarly emphasise the importance of culturally appropriate learning materials, a balance between individual and collaborative activities, and adequate teacher training when implementing gamification in ESL classrooms. Zhang and Hasim (2023) and Chan and Lo (2024) identify concerns associated with excessive competition and inconsistent learning outcomes, suggesting that teachers should balance competitive activities with collaboration and feedback that emphasises individual progress. Furthermore, Helvich et al. (2023) highlight technological barriers and teachers' limited digital skills as challenges in implementing gamification. In classrooms with limited access to devices or internet connectivity, teachers could use printed challenge cards, classroom progress charts and group-based language tasks. The low-technology approach discussed by Azmi et al. (2025) offers a relevant example of how game-inspired activities can be adapted to available resources. These considerations suggest that effective gamification depends on thoughtful instructional planning rather than technological sophistication alone.

Finally, teachers should evaluate gamified ESL activities according to both learners' motivation and engagement and their achievement of language learning objectives. Although increased enthusiasm and participation may indicate positive classroom responses, they do not necessarily demonstrate improved English proficiency. Hiver et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of examining the quality of learners' engagement, while Helvich et al. (2023) identify limitations in the evidence concerning language learning outcomes. Therefore, teachers could combine classroom observations with vocabulary application tasks, reading comprehension assessments, written explanations and speaking performance evaluations. Such assessments would help determine whether learners are meaningfully processing and applying English rather than merely completing gamified activities successfully. Overall, purposeful gamification may support learners' motivation and engagement when classroom challenges are aligned with meaningful language practice and appropriate assessment.

DISCUSSION

The literature examined in this concept paper suggests that the contribution of gamification to ESL learning depends not only on the inclusion of game elements but also on the psychological and learning processes encouraged by their implementation. Rather than treating motivation and engagement as interchangeable outcomes, the proposed conceptual framework distinguishes two related pathways through which gamification

may support meaningful ESL learning. This distinction extends previous discussions of gamification by considering how specific instructional features may influence learners' willingness to continue learning and the quality of their involvement in language learning activities (Chan & Lo, 2024; Hiver et al., 2024).

Regarding the first objective, the motivational pathway suggests that gamification may encourage learners' interest, willingness and persistence by supporting their psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Ryan and Deci (2020) explain that these needs influence the quality of learners' motivation. Accordingly, constructive feedback, achievable challenges and progress indicators may be particularly valuable when they help learners recognise their development rather than merely compete for rewards. This interpretation suggests that the motivational contribution of gamification is shaped by learners' experiences of progress and control over their learning. For ESL teachers, the implication is that rewards and feedback should reinforce meaningful achievement and encourage continued language practice rather than emphasise performance rankings alone.

In relation to the second objective, the engagement pathway emphasises how gamified activities may encourage learners to participate, process language, experience positive task-related emotions and interact with others. The proposed framework explicitly represents behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement, while peer exchange serves as a mechanism supporting meaningful social interaction in ESL learning (Hiver et al., 2024). For example, a collaborative reading challenge may encourage behavioural engagement through active participation, cognitive engagement through interpretation and problem-solving, affective engagement through enjoyment and interest, and social engagement through discussion and negotiation of meaning. However, these forms of engagement depend on the linguistic demands and interaction opportunities embedded within the activity. Consequently, ESL teachers should prioritise purposeful language use rather than evaluating gamification solely through learners' excitement or the number of completed tasks.

The proposed framework also recognises that motivation and engagement may influence one another over time. Learners who experience competence and progress may become more willing to undertake challenging language tasks, while successful participation and meaningful learning experiences may strengthen subsequent motivation. Nevertheless, these relationships are expected to vary according to instructional design, learner characteristics and classroom resources. Teachers therefore need to consider factors such as learners' proficiency levels, confidence, responses to competition, access to technology and the availability of instructional support when designing gamified ESL activities (Chan & Lo, 2024; Helvich et al., 2023).

Overall, the conceptual contribution of this paper lies in explaining gamification through distinct but interconnected motivational and engagement mechanisms rather than assuming that game elements directly produce positive learning outcomes. The proposed framework and its testable propositions provide a basis for future research examining how competence-supportive feedback, meaningful language processing, learner experiences and classroom conditions influence motivation, engagement and language development. For pedagogical practice, the central implication is that gamification should be integrated purposefully into ESL instruction, with activities and assessments designed to support meaningful English language learning.

CONCLUSION

Gamification has the potential to enhance learners' motivation and engagement in 21st-century ESL learning when implemented with clear pedagogical objectives. The literature suggests that appropriately designed challenges, feedback and rewards may encourage learners' interest, willingness and persistence in learning English (Chan & Lo, 2024; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Similarly, gamified activities may enhance engagement by providing opportunities for behavioural participation, meaningful cognitive processing, positive task-related emotional experiences and purposeful social interaction (Azmi et al., 2025; Hiver et al., 2024; Jalim & Ngui, 2025). Nevertheless, motivation and engagement remain distinct aspects of learning, and increased enthusiasm or classroom participation does not necessarily indicate meaningful engagement or improved language proficiency (Hiver et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings emphasise the importance of designing gamified ESL activities that extend beyond entertainment, competition and external rewards. Teachers should prioritise meaningful language practice,

constructive feedback and opportunities for learners to participate actively in achieving specific learning objectives. The proposed conceptual framework contributes to this discussion by distinguishing the potential roles of motivation and engagement in supporting meaningful ESL learning and language development. However, these relationships remain conceptual propositions requiring further empirical investigation. Therefore, gamification should be regarded as a purposeful instructional approach whose educational value depends on thoughtful implementation and meaningful learner involvement.

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